In 1976 R. S. Thomas delivered the annual literature lecture at the National Eisteddfod at Cardigan. His title was Abercuawg. He begins his lecture as follows: ‘Where is Abercuawg? I’m not certain that this is the right way of asking the question. I’m half afraid that the answer to that is that it does not exist at all. And as a Welshman I do not see any meaning in my life if there is no such place as Abercuawg, a town or village where the cuckoos sing.’ The poet tries to trace the origin of the name, but, whenever a place is suggested to him, on his arrival there he finds that it is not Abercuawg. We are fascinated with names and, once given the name, we want to locate that to which the name refers – in this case, apparently, a place. Yet, the role of Abercuawg, the place where cuckoos sing, is not so straightforward as it seems. It is natural to assume that, if the first place we have come across is not Abercuawg, and a second place is not Abercuawg either, it makes sense to hope that some future place we arrive at will, in fact, be Abercuawg. But this is precisely what R. S. Thomas denies. Abercuawg is not a discoverable locality in that sense. ‘The fact that we travel to the locality of Machynlleth to search for the location of Abercuawg and say: “No, this is not it”, means nothing. This is not an occasion for disappointment and hopelessness, but a way of getting to know better, through its absence, the nature of the place we are looking for.’ Abercuawg cannot be located first, before we say anything about the various geographical locations about us. On the contrary, Abercuawg gets its meaning from the illumination it casts on factual places. It is only by the emergence of a sense of something lost or beyond what we actually know that Abercuawg exercises a hold on us. Its presence, the difference it makes to the world, can only be grasped in the form of absence. R. S. Thomas says,

This is man’s condition. He is always about to comprehend God; but insomuch as he is a creature and finite, he will never
succeed. Nor will he ever see Abercuawg. But by trying to see it, by longing for it, by refusing to accept that it belongs to the past and has gone to oblivion, by refusing to accept something second-hand in its place, he will succeed in maintaining its eternal possibility.³

There is much in contemporary philosophy of religion which militates against what R. S. Thomas wants to show us. The assumption is made that we could settle the question of God’s existence first, before proceeding to discuss what it makes sense to say to God and of God. It sounds so reasonable: what point is there in discussing worship of God if we cannot determine whether he exists? And so we have countless books in the philosophy of religion which begin by postulating an omnipotent and omniscient God and then proceed to argue whether we have or do not have any good reason for believing in the existence of such a being. But the existence of what being? That question has yet to be answered. The initial postulation has already assumed that we know what we are talking about. But do we, any more than we would know what Abercuawg is, if we failed to realise that its presence can only be known through its absence? If we fail to take account of how the notion of Abercuawg enters our lives, if it does enter them, then it is likely that we will assume that Abercuawg is simply a place alongside or in addition to other places. If that is how we think of it, it cannot be Abercuawg; that Abercuawg which is not another place, but that which shows the sense or lack of sense of any particular place. So with God. If we simply postulate a conception of God at the outset of a philosophical treatise, that notion is completely unmediated. We have not shown how it can get a hold on human life. It is all too easy to make God an extra object, greater, of course, than any finite object, but an additional one nevertheless. In that event, the notion of God, like that of Abercuawg, will not come in at the right place. As an extra object, the notion of God could not bring the kind of sense it does to so many human lives. Cut off from that sense it becomes the God of the philosophers, not the God of living faith. It is only by seeing how the notion of God has a certain application in the lives of some believers that we can come to some understanding of the sense it has. As we have seen, Simone Weil expresses the point in a striking way: ‘Earthly things are the criterion of spiritual